Teaching Leadership

Kirke Olson, PsyD

On a hot Monday morning in July, I stood before a classroom of eight teenagers, seven boys (five diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and one girl named Trina. This was my first day teaching a summer school class entitled "Leadership." The concept of teaching a class in leadership seemed like a good idea back in the early spring when I proposed it. Now, the reality was more daunting in the face of the summer heat and the vagaries of early adolescence.

Introductions were the first task, so the students took turns stating their names and stumbling through a description of a personal strength. This emphasis on strengths, central to the practice of Positive Psychology, is one of the main supports of our program (Eades & Seldon, 2008; Fox, 2008). All of our students come from backgrounds where their negative views of themselves have been regularly reinforced, creating neural nets in desperate need of transformation. Thus the importance of this new way of thinking about themselves. Visualizing these old neural nets also helped me understand their awkwardness and discomfort when asked to state a strength.

However, some of the veteran students soon got into the swing of things, beginning to add positive comments to each other's strengths. We have found that this kind of interpersonal joining can be relied upon to help rewire these young brains in patterns of better attachment, leading to a more positive image of themselves as well (Siegel, 1999). As the encouraging comments made the environment safer, their social engagement systems came on line, and their brains were more available to absorb the kindness in the room (Porges, 2007). The exchanges were good for me, too. I noticed the warm, cheerful feeling in my body as my mirror neurons responded to the verbal and nonverbal cues of the familiar positivity radiating throughout the classroom. Being able to watch my own mind, brain, and body always helps me remain more balanced so I can support my students as they flow through a variety of states of mind.

This coherent flow was dramatically interrupted when Trina (a new student) declared, with a tone of authority, that she is "dumb, has no strengths and never did well in school anyway, especially math." Thankfully, a boy who knew her quietly and gently said, "You were a good friend to me in our old school." Trina's response was a curt, "Al, you sure needed a friend back then. You didn't have any!" The giggles that followed lightened the mood slightly.

Humor is a great brain integrator, and I hoped this exchange might yield a "teachable moment," that priceless split second when students are suddenly open and able to absorb concepts that have previously been inaccessible to them. We might picture their brains slightly disconnected from the push of old invariant representations and open to the new input in the moment (Hawkins & Blakeslee, 2004). I seized the opportunity by beginning a discussion about interpersonal intelligence. Trina described multiple punishments because of her "talking-too-much problem." We discovered she also equated "being dumb" with not being smart enough to stop talking. As I spoke and students added comments, I saw and felt (through my mirror neurons) Trina's dawning understanding that her gregariousness might be an interpersonal strength, rather than a "talking-too-much problem."

Dan Siegel's Triangle of Well-being (Siegel, 2007), wherein an integrating brain, a coherent mind, and empathic relationships interact with each other to create a state of mental health, is another core support of our school's program. When

considered from the integrating brain point of the triangle, Trina's belief that she had a "talking-too-much problem," is really a well-established network of neurons that have fired repeatedly over the years. One can imagine teacher and parent reprimands for excessive talking, helping to solidly connect the "talking-too-much problem" neuronal network. So we might ask how the other parts of the triangle – coherent mind and empathic relationships – might help her brain become more integrated. The moderately emotionally charged atmosphere of that hot July classroom was bringing the relationship aspect of the triangle into play.

Developmentally, adolescents are focused on peer relationships, so it was natural that this first class of the summer was full of both familiar and budding teenage relationships. The emotional atmosphere, the comments by her peers, and possibly my comments helped her begin to rewire her "talking-too-much problem" into a strength. Her smile, her head that was nodding "yes," and her more rapid, excited speech were evidence of the change. From the perspective of the Triangle, the empathic connection with her peers was encouraging a new pattern of neural firings. Hebb's Axiom indicates that repetition and emotional charge could help the new network of cells establish itself. At the same time, both empathy and brain integration were contributing to the emergence of a more coherent mind. A further indicator of the neural changes taking places was her narrative changing to an inner story about a young woman with unique abilities to connect with others.

As the class progressed, my goal was for Trina to cement in her experience that her high interpersonal intelligence could be the core of her leadership capabilities. Events conspired to help this happen. Right about then, a very popular staff member announced he was leaving. Trina, using her newfound interpersonal strength neural network, suggested the class organize a party for him. The boys reluctantly agreed, and the balance of the four-week summer program turned into a leadership lab with the party as the focus. Trina became the leader and gradually learned to delegate, including the math tasks for the budget. At one point, she even led the class and taught the seven boys how to bake a cake. As the hot days of July changed into rainy days of early August, Trina and her class hosted a large goodbye party that included numerous staff whom she convinced to come into school during their vacation and alumni she somehow discovered and invited. Her emerging neural networks were now releasing her capacity to create warm, empathic relationships in a much larger group. Seeing her make these first steps in developing the embodied mind of a leader evoked a lot of joy in me as well.

Kirke Olson is a New Hampshire licensed clinical and school psychologist, who sees himself as an "IPNB applicator." He applies neuroscience (IPNB) and positive psychology in his individual and family sessions with clients and in his school consultations with students, staff, parents, and administrators alike. With his wife, Sher Kamman, (also a NH licensed psychologist), he offers workshops that apply neuroscience, positive psychology, and EMDR to help people create a life they would love to live. For more information about Kirke, check out his website www.ThePositivityCompany.com or email him at kolson@wsfca.net.

Gruesser, S., Thaleman, R., & Griffiths, M. (2007). Excessive computer game playing: Evidence for addiction and aggression. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(2), 290-292.
Orzack, M. (May, 2004). *Online video games: Psychopathological or psychotherapeutic?* Lecture, American Psychiatric Association.
Orzack, M. (2006). Should we sell World of Warcraft by prescription only? In Bill Fawcett (Ed.), *The Battle for Azeroth: Adventure, Alliance, and Addiction in the World of Warcraf*t . Dallas, TX: Benbella Books.
Siegel, D. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. New York: W. W. Norton.
Yee, N. (2008). *The Daedalus Project*. Retrieved on May 10, 2008 from http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus.

Department of Education

Eades, J. M., & Seldon, A. (2008). *Celebrating strengths: Building strengths-based schools.* Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.
Fox, J. (2008). *Your child's strengths: Discover them, develop them, use them.* New York: Viking Adult.
Hawkins, J., & Blakeslee, S. (2004*). On intelligence: How a new understanding of the brain will lead to the creation of truly intelligent machines*. New York: Times Books.
Porges, S. W. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. *Biological Psychology, 74*, 116-143.
Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being.* New York: W. W. Norton.